

Interpreting Documents

The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom

In January 1786 the Virginia Senate passed the Statute of Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson. The statute established the principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state as law in Virginia. These principles soon became law for the entire nation in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Jefferson himself viewed the statute as one of his foremost accomplishments, stating that he wished most to be remembered for the Declaration of Independence, the founding of the University of Virginia, and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom

Be it . . . enacted by the General Assembly that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities. . . .

As we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall hereafter be passed to repeal the present, or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

1. What freedoms does the statute ensure? What protections does it grant?
2. Immediately after independence, all states required that their elected officials take a religious oath. What phrase in the excerpt above would abolish that practice in Virginia?
3. **Synthesis.** How does the last paragraph recall the ideas of the Declaration of Independence? Why do you think Jefferson added this paragraph?
4. **Application.** The Virginia Statute was an important sign of the potential for even greater pluralism in the United States. How might the above excerpt read if it were written to protect the freedoms that Americans have today?